TEFTA TASHKO KOÇO

(1910-2020)

ON THE 110th ANNIVERSARY OF HER BIRTH

**Dr. Pandi Bello**

*In memoriam*

The year 2020 marks the 110th birth anniversary of the Albanian soprano Tefta Tashko Koço. Albanians continue to consider as a happy moment when listening to her voice. Her crystal sound and pure tones are in resonance with the Albanian cosmogony. People continue to listen to the repertoire sung by Tefta, where she so perfectly captures the spirit of the pieces. Feeling interested and excited, people ask themselves: How could she reach such a high standard?

 Tefta touched these heights because from an early age, her whole being sought and embodied to the last limits—the art of singing. For Tefta, singing was a chemical element, which secured her physical and emotional existence. Singing was her great ideal and by this action, she encouraged the emancipation of Albanian society at the time she lived.

 The soprano Tefta Tashko Koço started singing in public since 1927, during one of the most prosperous periods of musical life in Korçë, first as a soloist at St. George’s Cathedral, then in a concert of *École* *Normale* and later in another concert in the *Lux* Cinema. After nine years (1927‒1936) of profound studies in France, in Montpellier and Paris (where she had numerous successes in various concerts and competitions), in November 1935 Tefta continued her concert tours, however not in France, but in Korçë. Meanwhile, she undertook additional training in Milan and Rome with the aim to enrich her Italian repertoire. Consequently, she became acquainted with two main schools of singing, the French and Italian, and tried to absorb as much of singing culture as possible known until then.

 Tefta put a colossal amount of work until it became within reach climbing the temple of the lyrical singer, that of operatic stage. Fate brought her to live the dream, singing at the Belgrade Opera in November 1945. The role of Rosina from Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* and Mimi from Puccini’s *La bohème*, sung here by Tefta, were received with a round of applause from the audience and musicians of Belgrade.

 All Tefta’s recitals in Albania were transformed into events of an aesthetic catharsis, a triumph of moral regeneration of the listeners. ‘With a merry sparkle in my eyes’– writes in his memories one of the singer's true friends, the writer Mitrush Kuteli– ‘I looked the pink tinges of the rising sun that tilted further up the coast’. For this sparkle and my spiritual chills, I am still grateful to Tefta Tashko; and I will be to her until the end of time … Then, in newspapers, for several years in a row: ‘Tefta Tashko’s concert for the Red Cross’; ‘Tefta Tashko’s concert for the earthquake and flood victims’; ‘Tefta Tashko’s concert to help the sick’. Landlords and merchants possessed gold treasures and amassed other treasures to give nothing in return. Ministers, deputies and senior officials received two or three fat salaries and had nothing to offer; entrepreneurs and usurers accumulated but gave nothing back. Tefta had only her voice that lent it to everyone and poured it on all four sides, in the midst of darkness …’. This is how the soprano galvanised the Albanian communities in the country’s many towns in the mid-1930s.

 Tefta could have had a good career in Europe and America. She was even offered concrete commitments. Yet, although today’s young people may find a bit hard to understand, in those days, for most who were pursuing higher studies abroad, patriotism was an entirely natural and real feeling. For Tefta's father, love and work for the homeland conveyed a message for his children; such a renaissance man Athanas Tashko Korçari was. Tefta inherited many of her father’s traits such as strength of character, courage, generosity and a sense of freedom (inalienable liberties).

 Equipped with the sense of initiative, she did not mind singing in the most difficult conditions. She, along with her colleagues, performed classical and national music repertoire, accompanied by an orchestra or a choral accompaniment. She even sang, like no other, after being diagnosed with serious illness that would rob her as soon as she turned 37 years old.

Characterised by an intrinsic motivation, she carved her own path of a noble mission, just like her friends of art and life: painter Vangjush Mio, poet Lasgush Poradeci, prose writer Mitrush Kuteli, sculptor Odhise Paskali, but also her colleagues of the lyric singer’s world such as Jorgjia Filçe-Truja, Lola Aleksi-Gjoka, Maria Paluca-Kraja, Kristaq Koço, Mihal Ciko, Kristaq Antoniu and others.

 The vocal technique and virtuosity Tefta possessed were deeply embodied in Rosina’s cavatina full of ornaments, trills and cadenzas (*Barber of Seville*). A full-bodied lyricism and pattern of phrase-lengths are demonstrated in Leila’s cavatina from the opera *The Pearl Fishers* by the French composer Bizet. Tefta’s emotive portrayal of Violetta in ‘Follie! ... Follie!’ and ‘Sempre libera’ from Verdi’s *La Traviata*, shows her abilities of a coloratura soprano with many *virtuoso* runs and high notes. She conveys to the listener Violetta’s emotional state of emergency, who is torn between love, tragedy (illness) and *joie de vivre*. These and some other pieces that she recorded for the Columbia Recording Company in Italy, in 1937, continue to the present day to make most lasting impressions on the listener.

 The presence of Albanian urban songs in her first recitals given in Korça, Tirana and Shkodra (a few months before graduating from the Conservatoire National de Paris), is evidence of the artist's cultural patriotism. This was the way Tefta aimed at bringing different social classes closer to the lyrical singer’s stage. While the interpretation of the urban songs was conceived in the style of the romance genre, the embellishment of the melody and the phonology of the Albanian language expanded the meaning of the subject, fostered progress and enriched the soulful horizon of the listeners, by creating a personal agogic style of urban song interpretation.

 Songs such as ‘Nightingale, You Poor Nightingale’ (*Bilbil o i mjeri bilbil*), ‘The Stream of Our Village’(*Kroj*’*i fshatit tonë*), ‘The North Wind’(*Fryn veriu*),‘I Am Your Lover’(*Dashtnuer t*’*u bana*)and about sixty other songs from several Albanian areas, Tefta registered on gramophone records in 1937 and 1942 in Milan. The refinement of song-types (of an urban stylised nature) could be easily ascertained today thanks to the art of artistic finesse of poetic expression conveyed by Tefta.

 Tefta had actually been born in Egypt (Fayum) and when her family after the death of her father arrived in Korçë, in 1921, she was only ten years old. The intuition in capturing specific expressive features of the Korçë urban songs or of other provinces, the enrichment of their musical scores with brilliant tones and obertones, are evidence of her talent, determination and future perspective. All these elements speak of the greatness of Tefta’s vision. On the other hand, Tefta skilfully switched from Albanian urban songs to a foreign operetta piece or a large operatic aria, while convincingly maintaining the authentic style of each genre.

 After graduation she brought from France such breadth of skill and depth of feeling that Albanian musicians had not until then been experienced. Her lyric soprano voice of a perfect school projected with all the delicacy of a great artist. What they heard from her graceful and elegant voice, people had not encountered before. ‘The apogee of Albanian singing’—this is how the conductor Mustafa Krantja portrayed Tefta—whose music flowed through her veins.

 Master of her work, Tefta entered the small and modest environment of Albanian musical culture of the time with her consolidated vocal technique and highly refinedstyle, which were worthy achievements and true foundations of a major and accomplished culture.

 Tefta created a new reality in the field of vocal interpretation, while when it comes to urban song, this reality could be defined as superior, as sublime.

 This was the life Tefta led and the legacy she left for those who came after. The social impact of her participation in artistic activities is as historic as it is current. For this reason, she represents a rare artistic and socio-human phenomenon of national culture identity.

 Tefta Tashko Koço was adored by many professionals and amateurs who lived between 1927 and 2020. The other singer with a golden voice, Nexhmije Pagarusha, called Tefta ‘immortal’. As time goes by, I believe that the music-lovers will always truly admire her.

 It should be noted that the singer’s most ardent fan was her husband, the ‘luxury baritone’ (to use an expression of the Russian musician Yuri Arbatsky), Kristaq Koço. To understand this, it is enough to read something about their lives. People had known them as an ideal couple, but Tefta's death for Kristaq brought an end to everything on earth. According to the memoires of Mrs. Mynever Shuteriqi, after Tefta's death, at a certain time each day (usually at 11am), at home, Kristaq prayed in front of her portrait as before the icon. Prayed as if he wanted to return her, to reverse misfortune that had befallen him. The tragedy had happened …

 Although at a young age Tefta experienced the bitter cup of suffering, deities had predestined another fate for her: To bring the joy and spread happiness around to others! And her captivating voice will surely always bring joy and spread happiness. It will suffice that people can hear her voice again.